

THE USE OF HEDGES IN TERTIARY EFL STUDENTS' PRESENTATION

Ihsan Nur Iman Faris

Department of English Education, Indonesia University of Education, Indonesia

E-mail: Ihsannif@gmail.com

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Abstract

The main objective of language education is to enable students to communicate effectively. In order to achieve that objective, students need to master pragmatic competence. One of the pragmatic competences which needs to be mastered by students is the ability to use hedging devices. This ability is even more essential for students in tertiary level of education due to the some conventions which need to be followed. Failures in using hedges properly can threat the face of students and other stakeholders in academic contexts. This research aims at investigating how hedges are used by the tertiary students when addressing questions in a discussion session of a presentation. This research is a qualitative research employing interaction analysis method. The participants in this research were nine students of Language in Use course of master of English education program in a state university in Bandung. The findings demonstrate that hedges were found in all questions addressed to the presenters and the lecturer. Introductory phrases were the most frequently-used forms used to hedge and hedges function mostly to attenuate epistemic commitment in addressing questions. Although hedges were used when addressing questions in a discussion session of a presentation, some findings indicate that the hedges were not entirely in line with academic conventions. Based on the findings, the recommendations given are 1) that further research on the use of hedges in academic contexts be conducted, 2) teachers and lecturers raise students' awareness of the importance of pragmatic competence, and 3) teachers and lecturers give more concerns to provide students with pragmatic competence.

Keywords: pragmatic competence, hedges, questions, academic contexts.

INTRODUCTION

In order to be able to communicate effectively, students need to master pragmatic competences. One of the pragmatic competences that need to be mastered is the effective use of cautious and polite language or hedging device (Hyland, 1996a), defined as a linguistic form intended to dilute or weaken the certainty of an assertion; for example: *sort of, like, I think and kind of* (Wearing, 2004; Cruse, 2006). Since the use of languages is related to the context where

the languages are used, communication breakdown occur most-frequently because of lack of pragmatic competences (Byram, 1994; Kramsch, 1998) such as the lack of ability to use hedges. As the main objective of language education is enabling students to communicate in various contexts (Brown, 2000; Harmer, 2007), investigations of students' pragmatic competences need to be conducted. However, research investigating pragmatic competences of students is

still scarce (Neary-Sundquist, 2013). The scarcity may due to the characteristic of pragmatic research which is more closely related to the field of linguistic instead of the field of education. Hence, this research aims at investigating the use of hedging in an academic context.

In a tertiary education, the ability to use hedges is one of determinative factors to achieve success. Students in the tertiary level of education are required to use hedges properly when putting forward a statement both in spoken and written communications (Hyland, 1996a). Statements need to be delivered carefully, because a false statement can threat the credibility of students/academicians asserting the statements and also other students/academicians having different points of view related to issues concerned (Hyland, 1996a and 1996b). In a similar vein, Alwasilah (2015) asserts that tertiary students need to avoid making over-claimed statements. The over-claimed statements can be avoided, for instance, by using hedges in the form of citing properly theories or reports put forward by other academicians (Emilia, 2009; Malik and Hamied, 2014; Alwasilah, 2015). However, due to the limited exposure and use of English in daily interactions (Judd, 1999), tertiary students in EFL countries tend to have difficulties in acquiring pragmatic competences such as the ability to use hedges.

Plethora of research on the use of hedges in academic contexts has been conducted. The research focused on investigating the use of hedges in academic writing has been employed by Hyland (1996b). He reported that English students in Hong Kong tend to underuse hedges in their writing. Underusing hedges in academic writing makes the precision of their writing

frequently-questioned. The other research investigating the use of hedges of students was conducted by Neary-Sundquist (2013), reporting that non-native secondary school students tend to use fewer hedges in their spoken interaction compared to native students. Hedging in the two previous investigations was found most-frequently in the forms of modal lexical verbs (e.g. to think, to believe, etc.). The two researchers have depicted how hedges are used by non-native secondary students in written and spoken interactions. However, research on the use of hedges by tertiary students in EFL countries such as Indonesia, especially, in a specific context such as in a discussion session of a presentation is still scarce. This research aims at filling the gap by investigating the hedges practiced by students of a state university in Indonesia. This research is geared toward revealing how the tertiary students hedge when addressing questions in the discussion session of a presentation and the function of hedges in the questions addressed by the tertiary students in the discussion session of a presentation.

The results of this research are expected to enrich the theories of pragmatics especially in terms of the use of hedges. This research reveals the forms and functions of hedges the students use when addressing a question in a discussion session of a presentation. Hence, the results of this research can be used to depict the pragmatic competence of the tertiary students especially in terms of using hedges. Moreover, by learning from this research, teachers and students can evaluate the teaching of pragmatic competence in their class.

In general, hedging is defined as an expression weakening a speaker's commitment to some aspects of a

statement (Cruse, 2006). When statements uttered by speakers are hedged, speakers demonstrate that the information contained in the statements is limited. Hedging serves as metalingual glosses to Grice's conversational maxims, namely maxim of quantity, maxim of quality, maxim of manner, and maxim of relevance (Grundy, 2008). The use of hedges indicates that speakers to some extent modify the conversational maxims. However, despite being scrupulous, speakers tend to be unaware of the hedging practiced in the conversation (Grundy, 2008).

Categorizing hedges based on linguistic forms utilized tends to be a difficult task. The difficulty is due to the use of hedges bound to the context where communication occurs (Hyland, 1996a). Linguistic forms used in hedging cannot be defined unequivocally and universally. For instance, humor which tends to be different across culture to some extent can be categorized as hedging device as well (Murata, 2014). Nonetheless, referring to a particular theory of categorization can be helpful to portray how hedges are used by the tertiary students. This research takes the categorization of hedges proposed by Salager-Mayer (1994, cited in Al-Rashady, 2012) due to its wide and extensive categorization. Generally, the linguistic forms categorized as hedges in this research are 1) modal auxiliary verbs such as *may, might, can, could, would, should*), 2) modal lexical verbs such as *seem, to appear, to believe, to assume, to suggest, to estimate, to tend, to think, to argue, to indicate, to propose, to speculate*, 3) adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrase 4) approximators of degree, quantity, frequency and time such as *approximately, roughly, about, often, occasionally, generally, somehow, a lot of*, 5) introductory phrases such as *I*

believe, to our knowledge, it is our view that, we feel that, 6) *if* clauses, and 7) compound hedges or phrases made up of several hedges such as *would appear, it seems reasonable*, etc.

As for the function of hedging, the general explanation can be accounted to Hyland (1996b) explaining that hedging functions to avoid face-threatening behavior and demonstrate politeness in particular situations. Since hedging is related to politeness, the use of hedges tends to be related to the universal notions of politeness, namely, power, distance, and imposition (Grundy, 2008). In the education field, Ha (2010) states that teachers or lecturers in the eastern part of the world tend to have bigger power and wider gap with the students. Hence, hedges will tend to be used more-frequently when addressing questions to teachers or lecturers. Similar with the categorization of forms of hedging, the functions of hedging are also context bound (Hyland, 1996a). The function of hedging needs to be interpreted based on the context where the communication takes place. Nonetheless, to ease the identification of functions of hedging in the context of this research, theories underpinning the categorization of function of hedging need to be employed. This research employs the categorization proposed by Jallifer and Alavi-Nia (2012), categorizing the function of hedging into 15 distinctive categories. The functions of hedging referred in this research are modulation (modifiers used to modulate the impact of an utterance, or to introduce fuzziness into the propositional content), evasion (withholding some of the information the interlocutors expect the speaker to give, thereby making statements without giving information) attenuating epistemic commitment, hesitation

(deliberately employed malfunctions, used to indicate that the speaker has qualms), covering up one's views and facts, de-emphasizing a claim (a clarification strategy used as a policy of appeasement), expressing conditions (expressing the conditions under which an event may or may not happen), counter-expectation (disclaiming some expected rather than a directly negated position), bounding downtoners (linguistic devices for achieving intra-textual cohesion which may be used to de-emphasize or play down the importance of the speech act they introduce), expressing possible incompleteness of an action which is in progress at a specific time, agent avoiding (using devices which impersonalize and create social distance), source-tagging: deresponsibilizing devices, limiting generalizability (modifying a claim in such a way that its effect will be narrowed down to some specific situation or condition), seeking solidarity (the speaker invites the hearers to adopt his/her point of view), and miscellaneous hedges (hedges which are so sporadically used that they do not form an outstanding class).

The category of functions and forms of hedging elaborated above can be extended as hedging can be found differently based on the context where communication occurs. Different forms and functions of hedges found in this research may not belong to any categories mentioned. New categories of hedging may be proposed.

This session aims at portraying how hedges are used differently in various contexts. Elaborating how people hedge in various contexts can give a clearer portrayal of how hedging in an academic context is distinctive, yet may have similar characteristics with

hedging in other contexts. Hedges used in a presidential debate, for instance, have a similar characteristic with hedges in a tertiary student presentation in terms of discussion session provided. The gender issue in the use of hedges can also be found in an academic context, as men and women tend to have more equal positions in academic contexts.

In political situations such as a presidential debate, the use of hedges is pervasive. The technique used to deliver facts and argument is one of the important factors to gather votes (Tenorio, 2002 cited in Jallifar and Alavi-Nia, 2012). Hedging can also be used to cover contrasting ideologies cautiously and to portray presidency candidates as reserved but honest politicians (Al-Rashady, 2012). The ability to use hedges is one of the crucial aspects to survive in a political competition since images of politicians tend to be constructed through the language used. Moreover, in daily interactions, men and women tend to use hedges. Some scholars (e.g Wareing, 2004; Bloomer, Griffiths, and Merrison, 2005; and Guendouzi, 2005) suggest that women tend to use hedges more frequently than men. The claim is grounded by the argument stating that women prefer to avoid conflict and confrontation by using less direct form of communication (Wareing, 2004). Additionally, hedging is seen as one of the features in women's talk especially in the talk involving painful self-disclosure (PSD). This feature is used more-frequently by women to seek solidarity in interactions with other women (Guendouzi, 2005).

In academic contexts, the ability to use hedges is one of determinative factors to achieve success. Students in an academic context such as in a tertiary level of education are required to use

hedges properly when putting forward a statement both in spoken and written communications (Hyland, 1996a). Statements need to be delivered carefully, because a false statement can threaten the credibility of students/academicians asserting the statements and also other students/academicians having different points of view related to issues concerned (Hyland, 1996a and 1996b). In a similar vein, Alwasilah (2015) asserts that tertiary students need to avoid making over-claimed statements. The over-claimed statements can be avoided, for instance, by using hedges in the form of citing properly theories or reports put forward by other academicians (Emilia, 2009; Malik and Hamied, 2014; Alwasilah, 2015). However, due to the limited exposure and use of English in daily interactions (Judd, 1999), tertiary students in EFL countries tend to have difficulties in acquiring pragmatic competences such as the ability to use hedges.

METHOD

This research is qualitative research employing interaction analysis method. Interaction analysis method is perceived suitable to be employed in this research due to its set of characteristics. According to Nunan (1992) the method of generating data in interaction analysis is naturalistic and the mode of data collected is in the form of spoken language. The method then suits the type of data collected in this research. The utterances in a discussion session were not interrupted by the researcher; therefore, the data are natural. Furthermore, this method allows researchers to have the interpretative type of analysis on linguistic and non-linguistic unit of analysis (Nunan, 1992). Allowing the researcher to have

interpretative data on linguistic and non-linguistic unit of analysis opens the space to reveal new findings or categorization different from previous investigations. Nonetheless, a categorical type of analysis is also employed to ease the identification of forms and functions of hedges practiced by the tertiary EFL students.

The students taken as participants in this research are nine students of *Language in Use* course of Master of English Education Program of a state university in Bandung. The participants were selected purposively since they are considered able to elicit the necessary data for this research (Malik and Hamied, 2014). Students in tertiary level, especially in postgraduate studies, are required to produce academic works (Alwasilah, 2015). The students in this research then are assumed to have mastered pragmatic competences related to academic context such as in writing and presenting research reports. Moreover, the class taken as the sample is the *Language in Use* class discussing issues related to pragmatics. The researcher assumes that the class tends to require students to practice their pragmatic competences; hence hedges are predicted to be used by students. Moreover, a presentation in academic contexts, especially in the discussion sessions, is considered a suitable setting to collect data. The researcher considered some aspects in a presentation setting similar to presidential candidates' debate settings where hedges are frequently used.

The data used in this research were collected from the presentation sessions of the "Language in Use" class held on May 18, 2015. To be more precise, the data collected in this research are questions uttered by students in the discussion session of two presentation

sessions. The questions were addressed to the two speakers presenting the topics related to pragmatics. The questions were also addressed to the lecturer giving elaboration and clarification to the topics presented by the speakers. The questions addressed to the lecturer were collected since they are related to the topics presented. Questions which are not related to the topics presented, such as questions asking the class schedule and deadline of assignments submission, were not collected as data. The questions count in this research are based on the turns taken by each student. Questions which are similar, elaborated or paraphrased count as one question. The questions collected as data were tape-recorded and then transcribed before being analyzed.

Data analysis is divided into two main steps. Firstly, to reveal how the students use hedges when addressing questions in the discussion session of a presentation, the data were transcribed and coded. The coding and categorizing processes were conducted by using bottom-up approach (Jalilifar and Alavi-Nia, 2012; Lange, 2014), where the data are categorized based on the context and the researcher's interpretation, and also top-down approach, where the coding and categorizing processes were based on theories (Lange, 2014). In the case of this research, the categorization of hedges generally was based on Salager-Mayer (1994, cited in Al-Rashady, 2012) categorizing linguistic forms indicating the use of hedges into seven distinctive categories. Secondly, to unearth the functions of hedges when the tertiary students addressed a question in the discussion session of a presentation, the bottom-up and top down approaches were also employed. After the linguistic

forms indicating the use of hedges in the research site had been revealed, those linguistic forms then were analyzed in terms of functions. The theories of function of hedging devices proposed by Jallifer and Alavi-Nia (2012) and the researcher personal interpretation were used as the grounds for codification and categorization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Hedging by using particular linguistic forms

From nine students taken as samples, only seven students addressed questions in the discussion session of a presentation. Hedges were found in all questions addressed by the students. Totally, there were 16 questions addressed to the presenters and lecturer. Four questions were addressed to the presenter A, eight questions were addressed to the presenter B, and four questions were addressed to the lecturer. Mainly, the students hedge the questions by using introductory phrases, approximator, modal lexical verbs, modal auxiliary verbs, if clause, adjectival, adverbial, and nominal phrases, and other linguistic forms such as "err" and "what is it".

There are 73 linguistic forms indicating the use of hedges in the questions addressed by the students. Generally, the forms of linguistic found in the research are categorized based on Salager-Mayer (1994, cited in Al-Rashady, 2012) categorizing linguistic forms indicating the use of hedges into seven categories. However, linguistic forms perceived to be indicators of hedging, yet does not fit any proposed category, were recorded and then categorized as "uncategorized forms". The linguistic forms indicating the use of hedges in this research are as follows:

The occurrence of linguistic forms indicating the use of hedges in questions addressed in the discussion session of a presentation

No.	Linguistic Form	Presenter A	Presenter B	Lecturer	Total Occurrence
1	Introductory phrases	7	7	7	21 (28.77%)
2	Approximators	8	3	2	13 (17.81%)
3	Modal lexical verbs	2	8	1	11 (15.07%)
4	Modal auxiliary verbs	5	4	1	10 (13.70%)
5	"If" clause	0	4	0	4 (5.48%)
6	Adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrase	0	1	1	2 (2.74%)
7	Uncategorized forms	4	1	7	12 (16.43%)
Total Occurrence		26 (35.62%)	28 (38.36%)	19 (26.03%)	73 (100%)

The linguistic forms categorized into the uncategorized forms are "err", "what is it", and "for example". Those linguistic forms do not fit any general categorization proposed in this research. However, those linguistic forms are considered possible indicators of hedging since they indicate uncertainty or doubt. Moreover, as shown in the table above, hedging is used most frequently in the form of introductory phrases such as *I believe*, *to our knowledge*, and *we feel that*. The example of the use of introductory phrases can be seen in the following excerpts:

From what I understand, the reaction is more important to see if something is polite or impolite. For example if the imposition or the content are bad but the reaction is okay it is still polite. So the reaction is more important. What do you think?

The utterance "from what I understand" indicates that what is stated by the student is limited to personal feeling or opinion. This finding is in a similar vein with Grundy (2008) asserting that the use of hedging indicates the information conveyed by a speaker is limited. On the other hand, the finding that introductory phrases is the most frequently used forms to

hedge is not in accordance with some experts (e.g Salager-Mayer, 1994, cited in Al-Rashady, 2012; Neary-Sundquist, 2013) stating that modal auxiliary verbs and modal lexical verbs are the most-frequently used linguistic forms to hedge. The possible reason is due to the characteristic of tertiary education, especially postgraduate program, requiring the students to put forward assertions with supports from theories or research reports (Emilia, 2009; Malik and Hamied, 2014; Alwasilah, 2015). Introductory phrases tend to be used as ground of the questions addressed since addressing ungrounded or unsupported questions may end up threatening face of the students (Hyland, 1996a and 1996b).

The findings demonstrate that hedges are used both in addressing questions to the presenters and the lecturer. Interestingly, the findings demonstrate that hedges are more frequently-used when the students address questions to the presenters (presenter A: 35.62% and presenter B: 38.36%) who are their classmates, instead of to the lecturer (26.03%). Hedging is related to save facing strategy and politeness (Hyland, 1996a and 1996b), therefore, it is related to the underpinning notions of politeness,

namely imposition, distance and power (Grundy, 2008). According to Ha (2010), teachers or lecturers in the eastern part of the world tend to have bigger power and wider distance with their students. The wide gap in terms of power and distance then should have encouraged students to use more hedges in addressing questions to the lecturer in order to be considered polite. However, the findings in this research demonstrate irrelevancy with that notion. The use of hedges indicating politeness was found less when the students address questions to the lecturer. The possible reason triggering this finding is the closeness of the lecturer and the students. Distance and power do not create a wide gap between them, encouraging the students tend to think that using hedging to show politeness was not necessary. Moreover, the lecturer seem not to be offended by fewer hedges used by the students, indicating that the students are not considered impolite although they might trespass the boundary of power and distance. The reasons can account to Lange (2014)

explaining that being polite or impolite are defined by people involved in the communication.

Although to some extent not using hedges in an academic context can be acceptable, teachers need to provide students with pragmatic competence such as the ability to use hedge properly since students will encounter various contexts of communication (Hyland, 1996a and 1996b; Al-Rashady, 2012).

Function of hedging in the discussion session of a presentation

After the forms had been revealed, those forms are categorized into the categorization proposed by Jallifer and Alavi-Nia (2012), categorizing the functions of hedging into 15 distinctive categories. Overall, hedging in the context of this research served five functions: to attenuate epistemic commitment, to tag source, to approximate, to show hesitation, and to express particular conditions. In details, the functions of hedging in the questions addressed in the discussion session of a presentation are as follows:

The functions of hedging in questions addressed in the discussion session of a presentation

No.	Functions	Presenter A	Presenter B	Lecturer	Total occurrence
1	Attenuating epistemic commitment	10	15	6	31 (42.47%)
2	Source tagging	4	6	4	14 (19.18%)
3	Approximators	8	3	2	13 (17.81%)
4	Hesitation	4	0	7	11 (15.07%)
5	Expressing conditions	0	4	0	4 (5.48%)
	Total occurrence	26 (35.62%)	28 (38.36%)	19 (26.03%)	73 (100%)

The linguistic forms not fitting the categorization proposed by Salager-Mayer (1994, cited in Al-Rashady, 2012) can fit the categorization of functions proposed by Jallifer and Alavi-Nia (2012). The forms "err" and "what is it" are categorized into hesitation and the form "for example" is categorized into

attenuating epistemic commitment. The finding that linguistic forms not fitting a particular categorization can fit other categorization demonstrates that categorizing linguistic forms as hedging device unequivocally is a difficult task. Furthermore, as shown in the table above, hedging is used most frequently

to attenuate epistemic commitment which is usually indicated by the use of sentence introductory phrases, tentative cognitive verbs, framing statements expressing doubt and uncertainty, and epistemic modal verbs, adverbs, nouns and adjectives. The examples of the use of hedges to attenuate epistemic commitment in the questions addressed by the students are as follows:

From what I understand, the reaction is more important to see if something is polite or impolite. For example if the imposition or the content are bad but the reaction is okay it is still polite. So the reaction is more important. What do you think?

Can you explain more about intercultural communication? I am still confused about it. I am still confused about intercultural pragmatics. What is it actually?

As tertiary students are required to be cautious and precise in making a statement (Hyland, 1996a and 1996b; Emilia, 2009; Malik and Hamied, 2014; Alwasilah, 2015), the use of hedges to attenuate epistemic commitment seems reasonable. By attenuating the questions, the students tend to indicate that the information regarding the issues addressed was limited. Addressing questions without hedging may threaten the students' face since statements or questions without supporting theories or data tend to be rejected in academic contexts although the statements or questions may correct to some extent (Emilia, 2009; Malik and Hamied, 2014; Alwasilah, 2015).

The students in this research tend to use source tagging (19.18%) less frequently compared to attenuating epistemic commitment (42.47%). Ideally, in academic contexts, hedges functioning

as source-tagging should be used more frequently compared to attenuating epistemic commitment. In academic contexts, students should put forward statements based on academic conventions. One of the conventions is the requirement to cite reliable and valid references when making statements. The statements without any clear reference will be considered weak or to some extent the students will be deemed plagiarizing (Emilia, 2009; Malik and Hamied, 2014; Alwasilah, 2015). The use of source-tagging cover the lack of information possessed by students with theories and research reports. If the statements or questions uttered by the speakers are imprecise, the face-threatening acts tend to be altered to the theories or reports cited, instead of to the speakers personally. On the other hand, functioning hedges as attenuating epistemic commitment tends to be less strategic in academic contexts. Imprecision of information in statements or questions is covered by the individual personally and tends to be seen as an excuse instead of argumentation. Nonetheless, the examples of the use of hedges to tag sources in the questions addressed by the students are as follows:

People say that err you have to be you have to be what is it you have be consistent with what which where you are in American English British English or what, some just err some people say some people say about that, what do you think about that?

So, I have a question actually. We know that actually pragmatics will be embedded to the language that we teach then as we know that as English has become international language not only owned by native speaker and we know that there is a notion of intercultural

pragmatics, then err in teaching English whose pragmatics context we should teach to students? Do we have to teach people excuse me as the form of punten do we have to teach like duluan go first, that something related to culture right? How do we have to teach the language related to our context?

According to the academic conventions, the hedges functioning as source-tagging in the excerpts above may be seen irrelevant. The process of citing or tagging sources in academic contexts should follow some conventions such as mentioning the source specifically in terms of name and year published (Emilia, 2009; Malik and Hamied, 2014; Alwasilah, 2015). The hedges functioning as source tagging used by the students in addressing questions do not mention any specific information of the source. Further research revealing the reasons behind this finding needs to be conducted. However, the possible reasons can be due to the distinctive characteristics of spoken interaction different from written interaction (Nation and Newton, 2009) and the students' limited information regarding the sources tagged. Different with written interactions, the violation of academic conventions in spoken interactions tend to be tolerated due to the characteristic of spoken interactions which is unrecorded (Nation and Newton, 2009). However, if the finding accounts to the latter possible reason, then it means the students should read more references (Emilia, 2009; Malik and Hamied, 2014; Alwasilah, 2015). Nonetheless, the finding can be the impetus for teachers and lecturers to teach pragmatic competence, especially the use of hedges in spoken academic contexts.

CONCLUSION

This research investigated the use of hedges by the tertiary students in addressing questions. The findings demonstrate that hedges were found in all questions addressed by the students. The hedges were found most frequently in the form of introductory phrases and in the function to attenuate epistemic commitment. The finding that introductory phrases are predominant in hedging practiced by the students may due to the characteristic of academic context requiring students to support their statements with theories or data. However, other findings tend to be not in accordance with characteristics of academic contexts. Hedges were found less frequent in questions addressed to the lecturer having bigger power and wider distance and source-tagging function of hedging similar to citing references in academic conventions was found less frequent. Hence, the conclusion which can be drawn is that although the students use hedges when addressing questions in a discussion session of a presentation, the hedges do not fit completely some conventions of academic contexts.

Based on the findings, the recommendations are 1) that further research on the use of hedges in academic contexts should be conducted, especially in different academic settings and in terms of how specific forms and functions of hedges are more related to academic contexts 2) that teachers and lecturers should increase students' awareness of the importance of pragmatic competence, especially in terms of using hedging devices, and 3) that teacher and lecturers should provide students with more pragmatic competence, especially in terms of using hedging devices.

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